Studies in English, New Series

Volume 3 *Poe-Purri: Edgar Allan Poe Issue* Article 17

1982

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Sarah Helen Whitman's reputation has rested principally with students of Poe, especially with his biographers, and we have not served her well. We have made too much of her as "Poe's Helen," as that eccentric Providence widow who, six years older than Poe, came literally within hours of marrying him in December of 1848 and who passed the remainder of her long life cherishing his memory and serving his early biographers both as a living resource and as a kind of research assistant. What we have not made enough of, or perhaps what we have not bothered to discover, is that Mrs. Whitman was much more than just another of those literary ladies who owe their little immortality to having dallied with the author of "The Raven." Mrs. Whitman was a charming, a witty, and a gifted person; she was a talented poet and an unusually perceptive literary critic. Even Hervey Allen, admittedly not among her admirers, was compelled to concede that "she was undoubtedly the most 'civilized' woman whom Poe had ever approached."[1] Edward Wagenknecht, who is among her admirers, has described her as "the woman who, of all the women [Poe] knew, came closest to being his peer."[2] Mrs. Whitman was even more: she was, perhaps, the only contemporary of Poe who recognized some of the larger dimensions of his work, and she was one of only a very few persons in the nineteenth century who managed to achieve a clear understanding of his place within the context of his own age. The best evidence for these claims in her behalf rests in two works she wrote about Poe. One is a poem composed even before she met him. The other is her little book, *Edgar Poe and His Critics,* published ten years after his death. Seen in their proper light, these items should establish Mrs. Whitman as at least a candidate for the most underrated critic of Poe in the nineteenth century.

I

Mrs. Whitman's interest in Poe's work, her "fascination," as she called it, went back four or five years before she met him for the first time in September of 1848. The events leading up to that meeting were set in motion by an anonymous poetic message she addressed to him

earlier in the year. The message, in ten six-line stanzas, was recited at a Valentine's Day soiree held at the home of Anne Lynch in New York, and it was published the following month in Nathaniel Parker Willis's *Home Journal*.[3] Playfully addressed to Poe in the character of his "grim and ancient Raven," the valentine is, in effect, a fan letter from an unusually impressionable and perceptive reader whose "vagrant fancy" has been haunted by Poe and his work:

Oh, thou grim and ancient Raven,
From the Night's Plutonian shore,
Oft, in dreams, thy ghastly pinions
Wave and flutter round my door—
Oft thy shadow dims the moonlight
Sleeping on my chamber floor!

Romeo talks of "white doves trooping
Amid crows, athwart the night;"
But to see thy dark wing swooping
Down the silver path of light,
Amid swans and dovelets stooping,
Were, to me, a nobler sight.

Oft, amid the twilight glooming,
Round some grim, ancestral tower,
In the lurid distance looming,
I can see thy pinions lower—
Hear thy sullen storm-cry booming
Thro' the lonely midnight hour.

. . . . . .

Oft, this work-day world forgetting,
From its turmoil curtained snug,
By the sparkling ember sitting,
On the richly broidered rug,
Something, round about me flitting,
Glimmers like a "Golden-Bug."

Dreamily its path I follow,
In a "bee-line," to the moon,
Till, into some dreary hollow
Of the midnight, sinking soon,
Lo! he glides away before me,
And I lose the golden boon.

Oft, like Proserpine, I wander
On the Night's Plutonian shore,
Hoping, fearing, while I ponder

On thy loved and lost Lenore,
Till thy voice, like distant thunder,
Sounds across the lonely moor.

From thy wing, one purple feather
Wafted o'er my chamber floor,
Like a shadow o'er the heather,
Charms my vagrant fancy more
Than all the flowers I used to gather
On "Idalia's velvet shore."

But the melancholy and gloom in Poe did more than charm Mrs. Whitman's "vagrant fancy." They suggested to her a profound pessimism pervading his work, a pessimism which she saw as a sullen repudiation of the facile and foolish optimism of his contemporaries, especially the optimism of those celebrants of progress through technology who promoted the absurdity that their Age of Iron could somehow be redeemed, a Golden Age somehow restored, through the alchemy of steam and machinery. Mrs. Whitman makes the point cleverly through the language of her bird metaphor: Poe is our grim and solemn raven among a flock of mere popinjays and parrots:

Midst the roaring of machinery,
And the dismal shriek of steam,
While each popinjay and parrot,
Makes the golden age his theme,
Oft, methinks, I hear thee croaking,
"All is but an idle dream."

While these warbling "guests of summer"
Prate of "Progress" evermore,
And, by dint of *iron foundries,*
Would this golden age restore,
Still, methinks, I hear thee croaking,
Hoarsely croaking, "Nevermore."

This is a remarkable assessment, especially so when we consider that it was made when most of Poe's contemporaries, even such renowned commentators as Emerson, Walt Whitman, James Russell Lowell, and (later) Henry James, could make little more of him than "the jingle man," an electric light, forty percent fudge, and an index to adolescence. The depths Mrs. Whitman glimpsed in Poe even before she met him in 1848 were not to become widely recognized until well into the following century.

II

Mrs. Whitman published *Edgar Poe and His Critics* in 1860, twelve years after she wrote her valentine poem.[4] Though it is widely known and is even now available in reprint, this little book, really no more than an essay of eighty-odd pages, has seldom been taken seriously by students of Poe, presumably for the same reasons that they have seldom taken Mrs. Whitman herself seriously. What probably puts off most readers is the Spiritualism which pervades the book. We tend to dismiss the whole performance as naive and eccentric. Mrs. Whitman, however, took her Spiritualism seriously. She had been interested in the occult for most of her adult life, and when Spiritualism appeared on the scene, coinciding, as it happened, with her romance with Poe, she was swept up in the Movement. Indeed, her interest in Spiritualism and her association with Poe developed together and became so closely intertwined in her mind that she was convinced he was frequently in touch with her even after his death and was personally closer to her then than he had been before "passing over," to use a favorite expression of the Movement. On her part, of the dozen or so poems she devoted to Poe after October of 1849, more than half are addressed to him directly, not as apostrophes but as genuine messages.

It is one of the paradoxes of Mrs. Whitman's mind as well as one of the fascinations about her personality that her eccentricities seem not to have impaired her judgment. Though they may color or even obscure an issue, they tend not to distort or to misrepresent it. And so it is with *Edgar Poe and His Critics*. If we can ignore, discount, penetrate, or outflank its Spiritualism, the reward is well worth the effort. What we will discover is an explanation of what Mrs. Whitman calls "the true point of view from which his genius should be regarded."[5] She recognizes that Poe can be understood not as a detached and alien spirit dwelling somewhere out of Space and out of Time, but that he can be known best only as a product of his own age, as one who shared what she identifies as the "pervading scepticism of the time."[6]

Mrs. Whitman traces the origins of Poe's peculiar genius to a disorder in his personality and to a crisis in his personal life. The disorder was both a deficiency in what she calls "that supreme central force or faculty of the mind, whose function is a God-conscious and God-adoring faith" and an "abnormal preponderance of the analyti-

cal and imaginative faculties."[7] Though this may sound like just so much phrenological claptrap, her message unscrambled is that Poe was an intrinsically skeptical soul whose fate it was to have been born into an inherently skeptical age. The personal crisis that Mrs. Whitman singles out is his relationship to Jane Stith Stanard, the young Richmond matron who inspired his first "To Helen" poem. Having been the object of his intense adolescent passion, her premature death precipitated a crisis in the life of young Edgar Poe. Poe himself told the story to Mrs. Whitman during one of his visits with her in Providence. Obviously moved by the impact the experience had had upon him, she retells the story in *Edgar Poe and His Critics,* dwelling heavily upon the significance of young Poe's nocturnal visits to Mrs. Stanard's grave. "These solitary church-yard vigils, with all their associated memories, present," she concludes, "a key to much that seems strange and abnormal in the poet's after life."[8]

As Mrs. Whitman describes it, Poe's crisis resembles the crisis of youth in Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," where the agony of confronting the loss of a loved one not only thrusts the child into a world of mortality, it transforms him into a poet, into the "outsetting bard." But where Walt Whitman's bard is "a chanter of pains and joys," Poe is a chanter of pain only, and his is a world quite unlike the one Walt Whitman celebrates. Mrs. Whitman describes this painful world and Poe's place in it in the climactic passages of *Edgar Poe and His Critics:*

> When Poe's genius began to unfold itself the age was moving feverously and restlessly through processes of transition and development which seemed about to unsettle all things, yet, gave no clear indication of whither they were leading us.
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> . . . . . .
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> The negation of Carlyle, and the boundless affirmation of Emerson, served but to stimulate without satisfying the intellect. The liberal ethics of Fourier, with his elaborate social economies and systems of petrified harmony, were leading his disciples through forlorn enterprises to hopeless failures. A "divine dissatisfaction" was everywhere apparent. De Quincey saw something fearful and portentous in the vast accessions to man's physical resources that marked the time, unaccompanied by any improvement in psychal and spiritual knowledge. Goethe had made his great dramatic poem an expression of the soul's craving for a knowledge of spiritual existences—

"O giebt es geister in der luft
Die zwischen Erd' und Himmel weben,
So steiget nieder aus den golden duft,
Und furht mich weg zu neuem bunten leben."

[If there are spirits in the air
That move between earth and heaven,
Why don't you descend out of the Golden Fragrance
And lead me to a new, more colorful life?]

Wordsworth, in his finest imaginative poem, "Laodamia," represents and half reproves this longing. Byron iterates it with a proud and passionate vehemence in "Manfred." Shelley's sad heart of unbelief, finding refuge in a despair too deep for aspiration, stands apart, as Elizabeth Browning has so finely sculptured him,

_____"In his white ideal
All statue-blind,"

while Keats lies sleeping, like his own "Endymion," lost in dreams of the "dead Past." Then, sadder, and lonelier, and more unbelieving than any of these, Edgar Poe came to sound the very depths of the abyss. The unrest and faithlessness of the age culminated in him. Nothing so solitary, nothing so hopeless, nothing so desolate as his spirit in its darker moods has been instanced in the literary history of the nineteenth century.[9]

Mrs. Whitman recorded her own estimate of *Edgar Poe and His Critics* in a letter she wrote to John H. Ingram in September 1874.[10] Responding to what presumably was a proposal that she revise her book, she protests not only that she is "well satisfied with [it] just as it is" but that she likes "it better & better as the years go by." So far as its reception is concerned, Mrs. Whitman prophesies that "its significance as throwing light on one dominant phase of Poe's genius will be better understood in the near future." Just what she meant by "near future" is not clear. Perhaps she had in mind that the truth about Poe would be revealed at the apocalypse which she and other Spiritualists believed to be at hand. Or being aware of the renewed interest in Poe in the 1870's, especially the sympathy of biographers such as Ingram who sought to challenge Rufus Griswold, perhaps she felt that the world was almost ready to appreciate what she had known all along and recorded in her book. Whatever she meant, Mrs. Whitman was no prophet. Although the book was reprinted in 1885 (seven years after

her death), again in 1949, and even now is available through a reprint house, critical appreciation remains what it has been since the earliest reviews—tepid toward the book and patronizing toward Mrs. Whitman. Arthur Hobson Quinn has come closest to giving *Edgar Poe and His Critics* the kind of serious consideration Mrs. Whitman sought, but even Quinn was unwilling to accompany her as far as she seeks to guide us into the labyrinth of Poe's genius.[11] "She goes too far," Quinn protests, but Quinn is mistaken.[12] It is not that Mrs. Whitman goes too far but that she has been far ahead all along. And why not? After all, she did get the jump on the rest of us with her little valentine back in 1848!

NOTES

[1] *Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1934), p. 604.

[2] *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York, 1963), p. 189.

[3] A reasonably accurate account of the circumstances leading to the valentine poem is given in Caroline Ticknor's *Poe's Helen* (New York, 1916), pp. 42-49. The version of the poem printed by Ticknor is not the original, which appeared in *The Home Journal* (18 March 1848), p. [2], under the title "To Edgar A. Poe," and is reprinted by Thomas Ollive Mabbott in *M,* 1: 442-443. Mrs. Whitman altered the text substantially and retitled the poem "The Raven" for publication in her *Hours of Life, and Other Poems* (Providence, 1853), pp. 66-69, and in her posthumous *Poems by Sarah Helen Whitman* (Boston, 1879), pp. 72-74. I quote here from the original text in *The Home Journal.*

[4] Sarah Helen Whitman, *Edgar Poe and His Critics* (New York, 1860).

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 59.

[6] *Ibid.,* p. 63.

[7] *Ibid.,* pp. 33-34.

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 54.

[9] *Ibid.,* pp. 61-65.

[10] John Carl Miller, *Poe's Helen Remembers* (Charlottesville, VA., 1979), p. 213.

[11] In his Introduction to the 1949 edition of *Edgar Poe and His Critics,* Oral Sumner Coad recognizes that Mrs. Whitman saw Poe "as many later

critics have failed to see him, not as a lonely genius wandering forlorn in an alien and uncomprehended world—'out of space, out of time'— but rather as a man in a considerable degree created by his age and in no small measure an expression of it" (pp. 18-19). Coad, however, fails to explore Mrs. Whitman's insights into either the impact upon Poe of both his personal makeup and experience or his place in the nineteenth century. Coad does, it should be noted, give passing attention to Mrs. Whitman's early valentine poem, but the stanza he quotes (p. 9) is from the text in Ticknor's *Poe's Helen* and not from the original publication in *The Home Journal,* thereby indicating that he was not familiar with the remarkable character of Mrs. Whitman's understanding of Poe even before she met him.

[12] *AHQ:* 691.